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## EDITORIAL

Baptists are truly a ‘people of the book’, a biblical people who labour and struggle to understand our book and then to live out that understanding in our communities and in the wider world in which we live. This baptistic ethos – which conjoins scripture, community and witness – is at the heart of what we at IBTS are about, as affirmed at the beginning of our website’s homepage: ‘We are a multi-cultural, multi-national learning and worshipping community, constantly seeking to be renewed and reformed for the better service of the Church of Jesus Christ and for the building of true human community’. There could be no better context for doing Biblical Studies than IBTS – with its vibrant, dynamic community life, rich diversity of perspectives and experience, and firm commitment to giving the very best of our minds and hearts to the study and application of God’s word.

In this volume of *JEBS*, I am pleased to introduce the work of two highly-valued colleagues in Biblical Studies at IBTS. We have been greatly enriched by the gifts of time and talent so generously offered by those who are part of our IBTS Teaching Team, serving with us through lecturing, supervising and marking. Dr Rollin Grams (NT) has been part of the team for four years, and Dr Robin Routledge (OT) for two years.

Both articles address issues raised by newer hermeneutical methodologies, which, though responding to significant weaknesses in earlier methodologies, also raise their own thorny issues for those who affirm the inspiration and authority of scripture. Dr Grams’s article on ‘The Case for Biblical Norms in Christian Ethics’, the first in a two-part series (the second will appear in *JEBS* 4.1), wrestles with presuppositions and interpretations from postmodern perspectives which have brought important perspectives – narrative and communitarian – to the study of ethics, but at the same time relativised the message of scripture. In his creative, synthesising study, Dr Grams seeks to forge a middle ground between affirming the value of these perspectives and affirming transcultural norms in scripture. In the same way, Dr Routledge’s article, ‘Guest or Gatecrasher: Questioning Assumptions in a Narrative Approach to the Old Testament’, deals with the interrelationship between theology, literature and history in light of narratological approaches that reject the possibility of discovering the author’s intention in communicating a message and thus arriving at the meaning of a biblical text.

The third article, of a very different character, makes available to the wider Baptist community a stimulating and challenging lecture delivered

by the Revd Mark Pierson at the IBTS Directors' Conference: 'The Practise of Ministry in a Post ..... World', from 24-30 June 2002. The Conference, under the leadership of Dr Parush Parushev, Academic Dean and Director of Applied Theology at IBTS, examined the changing cultural contexts of our world and how ministry is being and may be carried out in the life of the Church and in its witness in society. Mark Pierson's article, 'Reflections on the Shape of the Church in Post-Modern Western Cultures', confirms that he was an excellent choice to invite to lead the conferees in creative, visionary and radical reflection upon the nature of the Church and how to be the church in today's world; he brings valuable insights from the wide range of his pastoral experience, especially into the life of non-traditional Christian communities.

**The Revd Dr Cheryl A Brown**  
Director of Biblical Studies, IBTS

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# THE CASE FOR BIBLICAL NORMS IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS

## Introduction

This is the first of two articles on the use of biblical norms in Christian ethics. The present article is critical of a rather common rejection of transcultural, normative authority. I will first explore reasons for this rejection in our day and then offer several arguments on behalf of a normative approach to Christian ethics. At the time of some exciting conceptual shifts in theology and ethics, there is a need to reassess the significance of these changes for a normative ethic.

Stanley Grenz summarises three trends in moral theology over the past one hundred years:<sup>1</sup>

1. Christian ethics ... has shown a marked movement from 'doing' to 'being'.
2. ...Christian ethics has displayed a marked shift away from the focus on the individual moral actor to a relational ethic.
3. A growing number of ethicists no longer see the task of ethical discourse as determining the proper response to ethical quandaries the moral agent faces in the here and now. Instead they see their task as drawing from a vision of who we are to become and thereby setting forth an understanding of the moral quest itself.

Various terms are used to capture ethics with these newer emphases: 'character', 'virtue', 'perfectionist', 'communitarian', 'anti-foundational', and 'narrative' ethics. But do these newer emphases require a rejection of a concrete, normative ethic of doing? Applied ethical arguments, in particular, offer concrete guidance in a specific area of life (genetics, environment, development, and so forth), and here we tend to find ethics worked out in terms of properly informing one who must make difficult decisions with the help of moral principles.<sup>2</sup> However, even in applied ethics we see some effort to combine a narrative or virtue ethic with

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), pp. 202-203.

<sup>2</sup> Two recent examples are Nigel Dower, *World Ethics: The New Agenda*, Edinburgh Studies in World Ethics (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) and James C. Peterson, *Genetic Turning Points: The Ethics of Human Genetic Intervention* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2001). David Cook commends a method for moral inquiry which begins with collecting information – a method inevitably leading to a decisionist approach to ethics – *The Moral Maze: A Way of Exploring Christian Ethics* (London: SPCK, 1988).

concrete moral guidance.<sup>3</sup> Yet there is a trend to see virtue ethics and concrete, normative ethics as disjunctive. Usually, the argument is that the latter is undesirable, as we shall see. But those arguing in favour of a normative Christian ethic may also mount a case against the value of virtue ethics for moral deliberation. Oliver O'Donovan, for example, avers that 'an ethic of character is developed from an evaluative (third-person) stance, and cannot play a role in a deliberative train of thought.... [Virtues] become an object of practical consideration, not in particular moral deliberations but in a commitment to more conscientious moral deliberation in general.'<sup>4</sup> In other words, an ethic of being cannot lead us to an ethic of doing; it only leads us to a greater appreciation for an ethic of doing.

In the second article, I will try to articulate principles to guide our use of the Bible for a normative Christian ethic. But, over against O'Donovan, I will try to show how virtue ethics must play a role in a deliberative ethic which makes use of biblical norms. In short, my goal in these two articles is to argue that a normative and a narrative, or character, ethic are not incompatible.

## Contemporary Opposition to Norms in Christian Ethics

A normative use of scripture in ethics meets with disapproval for various theological, ethical and hermeneutical reasons, which I will briefly examine here. While these reasons may caution us in the possible misuse of authoritative texts in Christian ethics, I believe that they are not compelling.

### 1. Contextual Concerns

Lisa Sowle Cahill begins her essay, 'The Bible and Christian Moral Practices', with the following assertion: 'Scripture is most relevant to the Christian life at the level of establishing basic communal practices, instead of in formulating specific rules for action.'<sup>5</sup> She then asks how scripture might function as a moral guide, and this leads her to three introductory points:

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001); Bryant Myers, *Walking With the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 224.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'The Bible and Christian Moral Practices' in *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects*, eds. Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), p. 3.

- Scripture must be interpreted over and over again in new contexts since it includes diverse models for communities to use in relevant ways.
- The Bible cannot be treated as a direct source of timeless moral rules. Biblical authors were interested in the virtues or conduct that would best express fidelity to God for their own communities; our circumstances may be different and may demand different responses.<sup>6</sup>
- ...Some teachings, themes, or texts simply cannot be reappropriated constructively, in any form, by the believing community today. Perhaps they must be rejected as nonrevelatory, nonauthoritative, and even destructive of an authentic relationship to God or to Jesus' fundamental message. Some of the Bible's moral teachings are offensive to the Christian view of a compassionate, redeeming God, and she cites slavery and Paul's view of women's participation in worship as examples.<sup>7</sup>

Such points are basic assumptions for many today. Compare, for example, Allen Verhey's four principles<sup>8</sup> on the use of scripture for ethics (noting that point 2 c rules out of court any transculturally normative use of rules in scripture):<sup>9</sup>

1. Only if the use of a Scripture passage is coherent with its intention is that use in moral argument authorized.
2. The use of Scripture in moral argument a) is not authorized with respect to claims concerning an autonomous, impartial, and universal ethic; b) is authorized with respect to claims concerning Christian moral identity and its perspective, dispositions, intentions, and principles at the ethical-principle and post-ethical levels of moral argument, and c) is not authorized with respect to claims at the moral-rule level of moral argument.
3. If and only if the use of Scripture is coherent with the message that God has already made his eschatological power and purpose felt in raising Jesus from the dead, is it authorized.
4. Only if the moral claim is consistent with justice is the movement from Scripture to moral claim authorized.

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<sup>6</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'The Bible and Christian Moral Practices', p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. D. E. Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible* (London: 1976), who finds the cultural gap between the Bible and what is acceptable today so great that there is little room for the Bible to speak in our day.

<sup>8</sup> Both Cahill and Verhey actually use rules for interpretation to argue against the use of rules in ethics!

<sup>9</sup> Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 196.

## 2. Liberation Concerns

Both Cahill and Verhey affirm the important role of biblical exegesis in order to get at the meaning of the text, which must then be interpreted for today. But Daniel Patte claims that an insistence on exegesis is ‘unethical’; it is discriminatory and oppressive, since it tends to shut out any unlearned contribution to interpretation of the Bible.<sup>10</sup> As a biblical scholar, I often hear protests, not only from parishioners, but also theologians, that we in this discipline have locked up the scriptures in the chains of our erudite methodologies, our command of ancient languages and our knowledge of the historical context in which the biblical texts were written. Newer literary and, especially, reader-focused (e.g., liberation, feminist, post-colonial) methods<sup>11</sup> of interpretation are welcomed as keys to unlock these chains and liberate the biblical text once again for everyone to read. According to Patte, ‘a text offers ‘potentialities of meaning’ that can be actualized in a reading process that makes the text meaningful. Readers and their contextually-defined preunderstandings play a predominant role in the reading process.’<sup>12</sup>

## 3. Community Dependent Meaning and the Adoption of a Reading Strategy

Directly related to a desire to liberate interpretation from biblical scholarship is the tendency today to discount the very possibility of finding the author’s intention and the idea of a single meaning of a text, since readers are said to participate, if not control, the construction of meaning. Take, for example, Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner’s claims at the beginning of their book, *Liberating Exegesis*:<sup>13</sup>

Neither of us would want to jettison the historical-critical method which is an important resource for questioning readings which may tend to be self-indulgent and careless of the form and content of the text.... [Yet] we should accept the inevitable eisegesis... which is an unavoidable part of the complex process of finding meaning in texts – what we call exegesis. By recognising this process at work we will enable one another to be aware of the various kinds of eisegesis which

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), cf. p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> A helpful introduction to a variety of these non-author centred approaches to interpretation may be found in S. McKenzie and S. Haynes, eds., *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 95. Bruce Malina responds by asking what is ethical about not listening carefully to someone else, including a biblical author. Indeed, what is ethical about twisting another’s meaning? See his ‘The Bible: Witness or Warrant: Reflections on Daniel Patte’s *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*’, in *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Vol. 26 (1996), p. 84.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Rowland and Mark Corner, *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 5.



we practise in all their subtlety and sophistication. We will thereby seek to lay bare the various human interests which may be at work in the maintaining of particular theological or political positions of individuals and groups.

If Rowland and Corner, like Patte, understand their work in terms of returning the Bible to the hands of the marginalised, L. Gregory Jones and Stephen Fowl wish to recapture the biblical texts from the Academy and return them to the Church. They agree that the search for the meaning of a text should not be pressed: 'Rather than pursue this illusory quest for the meaning of a text, we recommend that we think in terms of 'interpretive interests'' on the part of readers.<sup>14</sup> Jones and Fowl advocate adopting a Christian interpretive interest. Thus they accept multiple meanings due to readers' interests, but they advocate a particular reading community's interests: the Christian community. Their intent is to replace the search for objective meaning with faithful reading, which takes place only within a community: 'No particular community of believers can be sure of what a faithful interpretation of scripture will entail in any specific situation until it actually engages in the hard process of conversation, argument, discussion, prayer and practice.'<sup>15</sup> This somehow does not mean that the community is in charge of meaning, though, since they wish to advocate that 'we must read scripture over against ourselves, first by letting scripture 'interrogate' us.'<sup>16</sup> In their approach, there is a place for theological exegesis, interpretation undertaken within the Christian tradition.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, any defence of one community's reading over against another's would have to be put forward on subjective grounds: Is it more faithful, consistent and compelling, and does it lead to more agreeable practices? Objectively, it is as defensible as any other group's interpretive interests. Thus, for example, Fernando Segovia advocates a postcolonial reading strategy, one which analyses and opposes the use of power behind the composition and interpretation of texts.<sup>18</sup> Whatever one's reading

<sup>14</sup>Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 15, following closely Jeffrey Stout, 'What is the Meaning of a Text?', *New Literary History* 14 (1982), pp. 1-11.

<sup>15</sup>Fowl and Jones, *Ibid*, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid*, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Stephen E. Fowl, 'The Role of Authorial Intention in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture,' in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies & Systematic Theology*, Eds. Joel Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 71-87. Fowl and Jones are trying to articulate what it means to read a text within a given tradition, and in doing so they are to some extent following the argument of Alasdair MacIntyre. But MacIntyre argues that within a tradition, a pre-rational reordering of the self is necessary (a commitment to the tradition), and that authoritative texts, while owned by a community, are to be interpreted by a trusted teacher. See his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, IL: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 82ff.

<sup>18</sup>Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).

strategy, community dependent meaning will find normative Christian ethics undesirable.

#### 4. Postmodern Biblical Theology

In common with points already made, a definable postmodern approach to biblical theology has now emerged, as advocated and described by Walter Brueggemann. He offers three characteristics of a postmodern biblical theology:<sup>19</sup>

- a. It entails a processive (not substantive) discussion (not interpretation) of local and provisional (not foundational) themes: 'The text is saturated with disjunctions and contradictions [such as covenant and exile, hymn and lament, presence and theodicy] that mark it as an endlessly deconstructive enterprise, and therefore our thematizations are likely to be quite local and quite provisional.' The First Testament itself is plurivocal.
- b. It is open to ambiguity and contradiction: 'Church interpreters of Hebrew scripture...must resist the Christian propensity [unlike Jewish midrashic interpretation] to closure', i.e., to resolve exile in terms of covenant, to end complaint with doxology, to let God's presence triumph over theodicy, [or, for the New Testament, to let Christ's resurrection triumph over the cross].'<sup>20</sup>
- c. It is a local and provisional reading: everyone reads from a certain situation, and every construction one offers of the text is provisional, not conclusive.

Thus the postmodern biblical theologian will turn from 'history as the controlling category of interpretation' to 'hermeneutical enterprises concerned with narrative, metaphor, imagination – all inviting open-ended playfulness', which does not insist on conformity and leaves room for conversation.<sup>21</sup>

If this is the new approach to biblical theology, then surely any desire to identify and submit to biblical norms is a foolish and impossible dream, let alone gauche.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Brueggemann, 'Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Vol. 27 (1997), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Ogletree has argued that the Bible has three kinds of ethical systems: deontological, consequentialist, and perfectionist ethics. He advocates the interpretive role of communities in their contexts as they sort through this diversity in the canon: 'What we require is a synthesis of the three determined by the temporal horizon of experience'. (*The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 17).

<sup>21</sup> Brueggemann, *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

## 5. Christians and the Law

Does the Law have a place in Christian ethics, or has Jesus terminated the Law? Did Jesus not oppose a legalistic approach to religion with his narrative of the Kingdom of God, or with an emphasis on virtues such as mercy, forgiveness, and love, or with a principle such as ‘Do to others as you would they do to you’? Did Paul not oppose the Law as a wrongful attempt to secure salvation through works, offering instead an interpretation of the Old Testament which shows God’s gracious character and the human response of faith in God? Indeed, does the Law play any role in Jesus’ or Paul’s ethics? Is Christianity not essentially a religion opposed to norms and rules?

This way of thinking about Jesus and Paul, about Christian ethics, is popular in Protestant circles. Yet it seems to be increasingly challenged by biblical scholars who are finding Jesus and Paul much more Jewish and much more open to the ongoing role of the Law among Christians.<sup>22</sup> The ‘new perspective’ on Paul begins with noting that Judaism was not a religion of works of the Law and included a sound theology of grace.<sup>23</sup> If this is so, then one must question any antinomian interpretation of Jesus and Paul. Indeed, John Calvin, one of the great reformers of a works righteous Christianity in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was by no means tempted to discount a positive role for the Law in Christian ethics (cf. *Institutes* II.vii.6-13).

## 6. A False Disjunction between Being and Doing

We have already noted the recent emphasis on tradition and narrative in ethics. These emphases alert one to the need for an anti-foundational approach to ethics, since a community within a given tradition works towards first principles, not from them.<sup>24</sup> Yet, as Alasdair MacIntyre has shown, this argument opposes a universal discernment approach to ethics, not a conviction that a tradition involves clear convictions or that a community has norms which it might enforce within its community.<sup>25</sup>

The tradition-objective moral guidance disjunction appears in other variations in writings on ethics, and so I call it a false disjunction between being and doing. An older (but not *passé*) and similar sort of false disjunction is that between eschatological existence (Jesus) and concrete

<sup>22</sup> One scholar recently arguing for the continuing, positive use of the Law in New Testament ethics is Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> This ‘new perspective’ began with E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); earlier scholars disputed his view of Judaism.

<sup>24</sup> Aristotle made this point in *Nicomachian Ethics*, 1.42.

<sup>25</sup> MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*.

commands (a later Church).<sup>26</sup> Another version of it is the false dichotomy between an existential call to obedience (the command of God) and a concrete ethic (commands of God).<sup>27</sup> But are disjunctions such as these necessary?

Several scholars think not. Richard Mouw writes: 'It seems quite plausible...to hold to a divine command perspective which places obedient human actions at the center of things, morally speaking, and yet still hold that narrative is crucial for understanding the intent of the divine directives.'<sup>28</sup> Jean Porter surveys the history of virtue ethics, demonstrating that many such ethicists saw no conflict with moral rules.<sup>29</sup> Twenty years ago, Edward LeRoy Long, Jr. supposed that there is no reason for the norms versus context (situation ethics) debate of the 1960s to turn into an obligation versus virtue debate in the future, for no such division between rules and character has been made in the past.<sup>30</sup>

This survey of arguments against norms shows that, Long's diagnosis notwithstanding, as situation ethics gave way to virtue ethics, many scholars have not wished to reconsider the situationists' rejection of norms and rules in ethics. Looking at the matter historically may give us the answer for this: as Liberalism gave way to Postliberalism, a Barthian, narrative use of scripture replaced a principial approach. While early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Neo-Orthodox scholars such as Karl Barth had been happy to affirm a 'command of God' ethic,<sup>31</sup> they nonetheless were not happy to find his commands in scripture (which was treated as a witness). Postliberal, narrative theology developed in response to Liberalism, not in dialogue with Evangelicalism, and so Neo-Orthodox views on revelation remain the answer to Liberalism.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>26</sup> This false disjunction is Willi Marxsen's central thesis in his chapter 'Ethics Oriented Toward Jesus' in his *New Testament Foundations for Christian Ethics*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> This appears in Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1935); cf. p. 84. It is recently affirmed by C. K. Barrett, 'Deuteropauline Ethics: Some Observations', in *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters: Essays in Honor of Victor Paul Furnish*, Eds. E. Lovering, Jr., and J. Sumney (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 161-172.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Mouw, *The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1990), p. 128.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Porter, 'Virtue Ethics', *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): pp. 96-111.

<sup>30</sup> Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., *A Survey of Recent Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 109. He refers the reader to Jonathan Edwards and Roman Catholic ethicists as examples of those who held both together.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. William C. Spohn, S.J., *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984).

<sup>32</sup> This is clear, e.g., in George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1984; 1<sup>st</sup> publ. John Knox Press, 1981).

## Why Norms?

While I share a great appreciation for the turn towards narrative, community, and virtues in Christian ethics,<sup>33</sup> I would suggest several reasons for supporting a use of biblical norms alongside these newer emphases. This is not an appeal for what Stanley Grenz calls a ‘heteronomous’ approach to ethics, a merely external ethic appealing to the Bible for laws or principles and then applying them to our lives today.<sup>34</sup> There is much more to biblical ethics than this, such as understanding the Church as the Holy Spirit-formed community, established in Christ and following him in discipleship, brought into a new relationship with God and active in His mission in the world. But this essay must instead conclude with several reasons for affirming norms within such an ethic.

First, the fact that scripture is contextual, located in specific times and places, does not mean that it is necessarily culturally relative. This or that text may indeed be culturally relative, but other factors need to be considered to determine whether this is so. Rather, the contextual nature of scripture provides an interpretive tool for readers: seeing a norm in context helps us to see its purpose, function, possibilities and limitations. Contextual concerns have to do with issues of interpretation, not the dismissal of norms in ethics.

Secondly, there is no necessary disjunction between a concept of community identity and norms, rules, laws, or obligations. Quite the contrary: these are crucial for defining the character of a community. For example, the use of norms to describe community identity is characteristic of Paul.<sup>35</sup> 1 Cor. 6:9-11 demonstrates Paul’s willingness to define holiness, a moral virtue, in terms of rules not open for debate, since disobedience results in exclusion from the Kingdom of God. An ethic that emphasises a community’s relationships and its relationship to God is not a license for the community’s idiosyncratic interpretation of this relationship. Paul expects that the believing community’s status in Christ should make

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<sup>33</sup> See my *Gospel and Mission in Paul’s Ethics* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1989); ‘From Being to Doing: The Identity of God’s People as The Ground for Building A Christian Social Ethic,’ *Transformation* (July, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> Stanley Grenz, *The Moral Quest*, p. 242ff. Grenz advocates a ‘theonomous’ approach to biblical ethics, an approach which is theocentric and relational and which interprets laws and principles accordingly (pp. 251ff). While Grenz’s discussion offers a good correction to any legalistic use of the Bible’s norms, it does not offer a robust discussion of how Christians should use biblical norms – a hermeneutical discussion.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Brian Rosner has shown, over against the mainstream of Pauline scholarship, that Paul did use the Law in an authoritative way in 1 Cor. 5-7 – *Paul, Scripture and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5-7* (AGJU 22; Leiden: Brill, 1994). Wolfgang Schrage has similarly argued for the ongoing importance of concrete ethical commands, including the Law, in Paul’s ethics. See his discussion of Paul in *The Ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

believers able judges of behaviour within the community of believers: able to see what is right and what is wrong, rather than to determine what is right and what is wrong (1 Cor. 6:-11). Indeed, the inability to 'see' God's moral will is a result of sin; yet God reveals His will in the Law (Rom. 2:17-20) and restores moral vision to believers through inward, moral transformation (Rom. 1:28, 12:2).

Thirdly, Paul's use of moral rules is not derived simply from their being expressions of underlying principles, values, virtues, or narratives (even though an interpreter will be eager to establish these relationships). The fact that Paul derives rules from the Law and Jesus' teaching in 1 Corinthians 5-7 shows that he is an interpreter of authorities which the community accepts: the presence of rules in a community's moral understanding is not only an instantiation of principles but also a factor of that community's acceptance of authoritative texts. For Paul, the community is under an authoritative scripture, not above it. So we, as Richard Hays advocates, must not create a Christian ethic divorced from biblical ethics: we need to be guided by a biblical moral vision.<sup>36</sup> Yet, this biblical moral vision includes many norms, rules, and imperatives. Any serious engagement with scripture requires that we do not rule out the possibility of norms prior to our reading of the text and then hear those norms when we find them present in the text.<sup>37</sup>

There are two corollaries of this point. First, Christian ethics requires more than theological moral inquiry. It does not derive merely from sound theological thinking, although I appreciate that the struggle of Neo-Orthodox, Postliberal and some Evangelical theologians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been to insist that ethics cannot be based on universal principles but must be moral theology. But Christian ethics in a Christian community of moral discernment requires biblical interpretation; and, if the Bible is an authoritative text for the community, that community will not seek

<sup>36</sup> Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996).

<sup>37</sup> While Fowl and Jones note that rules are embedded within a unified tradition's moral vision and are therefore fairly stable, they also state that rules are not independent of character formation through 'socially-embodied traditions' and therefore are open to revision (Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, p. 11). Nancey Murphy points out that MacIntyre and James McClendon did not rule out rules in ethics even though the emphasis may lie more on virtues ('Using MacIntyre's Method of Christian Ethics' in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition: Christian Ethics After MacIntyre*, eds. Nancey Murphy, Brad J. Kallenberg, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), pp. 39-40. Richard Hays, as a biblical scholar, affirms the role of Law in Paul's ethics while emphasising the narrative paradigm of scripture for Paul. I would agree with this, but I would not conclude that a narrative use of scripture within a discerning Christian community should oppose the presence of rules and principles. This is a false disjunction. Hays seems to accept this disjunction, however ('The Role of Scripture in Paul's Ethics', in *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters*, pp. 30-47 (cf. p. 47). The rules of scripture can keep communities from erroneous interpretations of scripture's narratives, just as narratives can keep communities from misuse of the rules.

liberation to interpret the text as it wishes, but rather faithfulness and consistency in its interpretation.

A second corollary of a community having authoritative texts is that such texts create concern over who interprets them. While there is a very rich discussion of this in the Church's history, only recently have some declared that the discovery of the meaning of a text is itself impossible and so readers are liberated from the rigours of exegetical method. If this is so, then we must also give up the notion of authoritative texts in the first place. Nobody should assume that we are able both to believe in authoritative texts and locate meaning in the readers of those texts. Brueggemann's 'Postliberal Biblical Theology' is a contradiction in terms. To be sure, interpreters of scripture need to offer an explanation of biblical theology which is textually compelling; and it may be that this calls for a more narrative approach to biblical interpretation. But if the Bible is to have authority over the community of believers, the community will desire to defend its interpretation of scripture. For this to happen, interpretation needs to proceed within a tradition, and yet a tradition which seeks to be shaped and reshaped by its authoritative texts. Hence the importance of (1) interpreters of the Bible who are also (2) committed to the community's tradition.<sup>38</sup>

Fourthly, an ethic of character is not at all at odds with rules for behaviour. Character is developed through forming habits, and habits are formed by repeated actions, as Aristotle realised (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.1). That is, an ethic interested in the agent cannot be divorced from an ethic with interest in concrete, right actions. Christian ethics goes further than the virtue ethics of the Greeks in speaking of moral transformation and the fruit of the Spirit; but a definable character, however attained, implies predictable, normative behaviour.

Fifthly, the useful idea that communities embody and are shaped by narratives, i.e., that we have story-formed communities, should lead us toward, not away from, an appreciation of rules. As James McClendon says, 'Where laws are understood as the rules for practices, and practices are the substance of an ongoing story, the necessity for their firmness and their flexibility are alike evident.'<sup>39</sup> Paul's exhortations to his churches often turn to narrative or character arguments (e.g., Phil. 2:1-11); but, equally, he does not turn away from listing sins (e.g., Rom. 1:29-32).

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<sup>38</sup> Such an argument goes back at least to Tertullian (*Against Heresies*), but it can be made to apply to baptistic just as much as catholic hermeneutics.

<sup>39</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., 'The Practice of Community Formation,' in *Virtues and Practices in the Christian Tradition*, *ibid* p. 96. (This essay is the same as ch. 8 of his *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986).)

Ethicists ought to show the relationship between narrative, character, and concrete norms rather than choose one over the other.

Sixthly, the fundamental basis for both character ethics and normative ethics is the same: God's unchanging character. The one God of the Bible, who acts (narrative) in ways consistent with His eternal Being rather than capriciously, is the God who commands how His people shall live. Any potential rivalry between a character and a normative ethic is resolved in the person of the one true God. This can be stated in terms of Paul's moral reasoning as a person who has the Spirit expecting the Corinthian church as a community of the Spirit to come to the same conclusions about how to live sexually (1 Corinthians 7, note v. 40). A view of the Christian church seeking moral discernment by remembering Jesus and being a community of the Spirit coheres with a view of the Church empowered, by divine authority, for moral discernment.

Seventhly, ethics in the Christian tradition is ethics with a long history of seeing moral guidance in terms of both virtues and norms. The prominence of Christian virtue ethics prior to the Enlightenment never entailed an argument against norms. To make such a distinction between the two emphases is to resurrect Marcion's confusion that the law-giving, judging God of the Old Testament could not be the gracious God of Christians. While these Marcionite readings of scripture continue today,<sup>40</sup> they have always been rejected by the Church.

## Conclusion

Ethics in the Christian tradition is today enjoying a much-needed overhaul provided by narrative and communitarian emphases in ethics. But if we are to be true to our Christian tradition, the rediscovery of virtue ethics must also articulate how this includes rather than excludes long-standing Christian norms, particularly those derived from scripture. In the next essay, I will suggest principles of interpretation for the proper use of scripture for moral norms.

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<sup>40</sup> For example, Willi Marxsen's understanding of Matthew's ethics in his *New Testament Foundations for Christian Ethics*.



## **GUEST OR GATECRASHER:**

### **Questioning assumptions in a narrative approach to the Old Testament**

In recent years the term ‘narrative’ has gained a considerable currency in biblical and theological studies. In part this reflects a growing recognition that because a significant proportion of the Bible is written as narrative,<sup>1</sup> we should give more attention to the literary nature of the text. This has led to an increased interest in ‘poetics’, described by Adele Berlin as ‘an inductive science that seeks to abstract the general principles of literature from many different manifestations of those principles as they occur in actual literary texts’.<sup>2</sup> Because narrative is an art form that seeks to convey a message and to make an impact on the reader, awareness of the literary and rhetorical techniques used by the writer enhances our understanding and appreciation of what we read.

A further consideration is the role played by narrative within the life of the believing community. It has long been accepted that history and historical event is an important medium of divine revelation. Biblical narrative seeks to describe the events through which God has made himself known and which have shaped the life and faith of his people. Through narrative, the community of faith reviews and reflects on the saving acts of God within its history and gives expression to its common heritage. An important aspect of what has been termed ‘narrative theology’ is the recognition that theology needs to take more account of the link between biblical narrative and revelation, and to seek to express faith in narrative rather than solely in propositional form.<sup>3</sup> This follows from the view, advocated by a growing number of psychologists as well as theologians, that human beings give order and meaning to their personal and spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Several things, taken together, distinguish narrative from other forms of writing. It has a plot, an arranged, causally connected series of events that take place within time and which tells a story. At its simplest, a plot has ‘a beginning, a middle and an end’ (Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch.7). The story involves characters and creates a world in which they feel, think, speak, act and interact with their environment and with each other. Narrative is distinguished from drama by the presence of a ubiquitous and (usually) omniscient narrator, who speaks to the reader directly, describing the scene and giving information about the characters – including insights into their inner lives. Another significant feature of narrative, particularly in the context of this study, is that it is related with a storyteller’s art, making full artistic use of language and literary styles and techniques.

<sup>2</sup> A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983/Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), p.15. See also the definition quoted in S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London/New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of recent movements in narrative theology, see, e.g. G.W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1984).

experiences through story, rather than through reasoned arguments and formulae.

A consequence of adopting a literary approach to OT narrative is the influence on the way texts are read and interpreted of post-modern literary theory and methodology, much of which has to do with questions about the locus, and even the existence, of the text's 'meaning'. As this approach to biblical narrative has become more widely accepted, some of the assumptions of post-modern literary theory have also been adopted, seemingly as part of the package. It is my contention that, whilst some of these assumptions are important, others are either non-essential or do not need to be pressed as far as they are by some scholars. This article will revisit three key assumptions, to separate those that are integral to the approach from those that are not.

### **The text needs to be read and interpreted as a literary unity**

Traditional, historical-critical approaches to the OT implicitly assume that in some sense antiquity equates to authority. So they attempt to discover the 'world behind the text': to identify sources, to trace the text through various stages of development to its original form and original historical setting. The meaning of a text thus becomes bound up with the ability to discover what lies behind it. And if that background is subsequently questioned the meaning is undermined.

One way to free the Bible from this kind of uncertainty is to read the text in its final form, as a piece of literature whose interpretation does not depend on external historical or scientific verifiability. This approach recognises that often we can know little about historical-critical issues. We can speculate, and proposals may become widely accepted; but that has more to do with scholarly consensus than with demonstrable proof. In most cases we cannot identify the text's author nor easily determine its sources or the way it has developed. The synchronic or final form approach sets these things aside as non-essential and focuses instead on the text as it has been received and accepted within the canon of scripture. The text in its final form has been put together with a particular literary structure and content, using particular language and forms of expression; and when it comes to interpreting the text, these things are at least as important as speculation about origins and sources.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See, *e.g.*, Berlin's discussion of the relationship between the synchronic and historical-critical approaches (*op cit*, pp. 111-134).

This emphasis on literary technique and artistry, wordplay, intricate connections between sections of the narrative and so on, may give the impression that major narrative sections of the OT were composed much as a novel might be. In a novel there is research, ordering of sources, and so on, but the final composition is the work of a single author. Alter notes that we cannot treat biblical narrative in such a seamless way; we need to recognise the composite nature of the text.<sup>5</sup> But nor should we treat the text as a collection of diverse traditional materials put together with little concern for the narrative's overall structure.<sup>6</sup> The text may have passed through several hands (including those of authors and editors) before arriving in its present form. The assumption is that at each stage of that transmission literary aspects of the existing narrative have been preserved, whilst at the same time existing strands have been woven together with new ones to produce what may be seen as a unified literary work. Inevitably, the final redactor plays a vital role in this; he is responsible for the finished work. But he remains a redactor, not an author, and the redaction is a 'textual collage',<sup>7</sup> rather than a smooth, unitary work. The final work is an integrated literary whole, though with some unevenness, due to the use of disparate sources.

Many aspects of this final form approach are to be welcomed. The starting point for most preachers is the canonical text as we now have it. Historical-critical questions are of interest in the classroom or study, but not the pulpit. Relating sources or original form to the final form of the text is also problematic. In his canonical approach, Childs argues that the processes that shaped the text into its final, canonical, form are a crucial part of what it means to understand and accept the text as revelation.<sup>8</sup> He recognises that historical and other factors affecting the growth of the text have a place,<sup>9</sup> and thus steers away (in my view rightly) from the dichotomy between the synchronic and diachronic that seems to

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<sup>5</sup> Alter criticises the methodology of Perry and Sternberg: 'They tend to write about biblical narrative as though it were a unitary production just like a modern novel that is entirely conceived and executed by a single independent writer who supervises his original work from first draft to page proofs' [R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books/London, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p.19].

<sup>6</sup> R. Alter, *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books/London: SPCK, 1992) pp. 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Alter, *World*, p.15.

<sup>8</sup> B.S. Childs, *Introduction to the OT as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 77; see also idem, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London: SCM Press, 1992), pp.70-71.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Childs, *Biblical Theology*, pp. 104-106.

characterise recent literary approaches.<sup>10</sup> But the canonical approach also gives explicit approval to the view that the whole of scripture as we now have it has value and authority, as opposed to the implicit assumption that what is later modifies the ‘original’ meaning of the text and may be of lesser value. From a theological and exegetical point of view this enables us to search for ‘meaning’ within the whole text.

### **The text has no single objective meaning**

Many literary critics challenge the idea that meaning in a text is defined by what the author intended and that insights into that intention can be gained from background knowledge of the author’s life, personality and psychology.<sup>11</sup> Uncovering such information is difficult, if not impossible. We have very little to go on – sometimes not even a name! And even knowing details of the author’s life we cannot be sure to what extent they influenced his writing. The difficulty is compounded because some authors assume a deliberately false persona in their writings. The conclusion is that we do not know enough about the biblical authors from external sources to make conclusions about their intentions.<sup>12</sup>

It is common among literary critics to seek to cut the text loose from fixed reference points. Paul Ricoeur argues that once written, the text takes on an identity of its own – independent of the intention of its author and of

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<sup>10</sup> The dichotomy between history and story is noted by I. Provan, ‘Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel’, *JBL* 114 (1995) pp. 585-606. The importance of holding the literary and historical-critical together is argued by R.W.L. Moberley, *At the Mountain of God: Story and Theology in Exodus 32-34* (JSOTS 22; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983) pp. 15-43; he maintains that ‘they are both valid and legitimate approaches to the text’ (*ibid*, p. 22). See also, e.g., J. Barton, ‘Historical Criticism and Literary Interpretation: Is there any Common Ground’ in V.P. Long, (ed), *Israel’s Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography* (Sources for Biblical and Theological Study, 7; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999) pp. 427-438; H.H. Klement, ‘Modern Literary-Critical Methods and the Historicity of the Old Testament’, *ibid*, pp. 439-59. In an essay on changes in the study of the Book of Isaiah, Rendtorff is sympathetic to the priority of a synchronic approach, though without denying diachronic issues [R. Rendtorff, ‘The Book of Isaiah: A Complex Unity. Synchronic and Diachronic Reading’ in R.F. Melugin, & M.A. Sweeney, (eds), *New Visions of Isaiah* (JSOTS 214; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) p. 40]; however, Conrad, in the same volume, argues that such an accommodation presents insuperable difficulties (E.W. Conrad, ‘Prophet, Redactor and Audience’, *ibid*, pp. 306-326). For further discussion on narrative and historiography, see below.

<sup>11</sup> The fallacy that extrinsic facts about the author should not be intrinsically related to the meaning of the text was exposed in W.K. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley, ‘The Intentional Fallacy’ in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954); see also, e.g., M. Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) pp. 8-9; K.J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998) pp. 43-97.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Sternberg, *op cit*, pp. 69-70.

the meaning attached to it by its first audience.<sup>13</sup> This allows it to go on speaking to successive generations of readers, who interpret it in terms of their own historical, political and sociological context. The result is that the text can be interpreted in a number of (equally valid) ways. As Gunn and Fewell observe:

Instead of seeking the one legitimate meaning, namely what the text (usually defined as the author) meant in its 'original context', we recognize that texts are multivalent and their meanings radically contextual, inescapably bound up with their interpreters.<sup>14</sup>

Reader response criticism is an example of this. It focuses on the interaction between text and reader. Interpretation depends on the reader and where he or she is coming from. In the extreme, a text could mean whatever a reader takes it to mean; though usually an interpretation must be validated by an 'interpretative community' – a group which shares the reader's worldview, preconceptions, political and cultural outlook, place in society and so on, and endorses the interpretation.<sup>15</sup> This approach allows the text to be read from different ideological standpoints, including political and feminist readings. Deconstruction reinforces the view that a text has no stable, determinative interpretation.<sup>16</sup> Weaknesses in the argument, unanswered questions, contradictions, words or concepts that may be seen from more than one point of view, emphasise undecidability and undermine meaning.<sup>17</sup> A further significant trend in literary studies is the critique and evaluation of the ideological standpoint and worldview reflected in the text.<sup>18</sup> Since this is usually taken to reinforce the ideology and values of those with power and influence, one reason for challenging 'traditional'

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<sup>13</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 92; Ricoeur allows that the interpretation of a text is conditioned by the reader; though the autonomy of the text sets limits on the interpretation (*ibid.*, pp. 78-79).

<sup>14</sup> D.M. Gunn & D.N. Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: OUP, 1993), p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., S. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class: The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, Ma./London: Harvard University Press, 1980) pp. 303-371; D.J.A. Clines, 'A World Established on Water' in J.C. Exum and D.J.A. Clines, (eds.) *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTS 143; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) p. 86; Gunn & Fewell, *op cit.*, p. 9; Vanhoozer, *op cit.*, pp. 168-74.

<sup>16</sup> Deconstruction is associated with the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. For further discussion see, e.g., Vanhoozer, *op cit.*, *passim*; T. Longman III, 'Literary Approaches to Old Testament Study' in D.W. Baker and B.T. Arnold, *The Face of Old Testament Studies: a Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books/Leicester: Apollos) pp. 107-110.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., D. Miscal, *The Workings of OT Narrative* (SBL Semeia Studies; Philadelphia: Fortress/Chico: Scholars, 1983) p. 2; Clines, 'A World Established on water', pp. 83-85.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of the influence of ideology on the writing and interpretation of text see, e.g., D.J.A. Clines, *Interested Parties, The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTS 205; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); Gunn and Fewell, *op cit.*, pp. 189-205, Vanhoozer, *op cit.*, pp. 166-68.

interpretations is to undermine the theological and socio-political institutions they (allegedly) shore up.

Recognising that the text is an ideological document reflecting the beliefs and values of its writer and that our understanding of the text is influenced by our own beliefs and values has significant implications for OT theology. We need to evaluate the dominant theological position of the text, but also to search for and evaluate dissonant voices within the text; and our own worldview and theological preconceptions will determine which voices carry the most weight,<sup>19</sup> again opening up the possibility of several different verdicts.

Such approaches may be taken to unacceptable extremes, but they also open up areas of debate that may be passed over by readers from a different interpretative group. No interpreter is neutral when he or she comes to the Bible. We all come from a particular cultural background with certain expectations and assumptions, and these influence the way we interpret the text and evaluate its theological ideas. We need to be aware of what we may be bringing to the text and how these things impact on our exegesis and our understanding of its theology.<sup>20</sup> However, if a biblical text is to have authority, in any meaningful sense of the word, it must have objective meaning. Scripture, as divine revelation, must be both authoritative and normative; and that means investing it with an objective truth-value. True, the text reflects the worldview of its writer and there is a need to look behind the language and ideology of the text to the theological principles it contains. And there are limitations on the reader, who is influenced by ideological background, and is also not in full possession of the knowledge and insight that would allow an unequivocal assertion about a text's meaning. But to accept that the true interpretation may lie beyond our reach is quite different from denying that it exists at all!

The search for meaning brings us back to the question of the author's intention. It is self-evident that the writer of a biblical text (and by 'writer' we mean the original author and the redactors who may have had a hand in bringing the text to its final canonical form) wrote intentionally. But can we know that intention, not from external sources, but from the text itself? And if so, does that help to determine the text's meaning?

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<sup>19</sup> Brueggemann argues that the text contains conflicting views, reflecting the interests of different groups. His model is a courtroom where witnesses' testimony is heard, examined, weighed and judged. However, 'such an interpretative judgment is never innocent or disinterested and may be decided variously – on the basis of one's own personal need and inclination, one's particular social setting or circumstance, or one's theological nurture and tradition.' [W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) p. 75].

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Fokkelmann, *Reading Biblical Narrative: an Introductory Guide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press / Leiderdorp: Deo, 1999) pp. 26-27.

The answer to the first question is a qualified, yes. The writer has a message to communicate and the text is the vehicle of that communication. Through language, plot and structure, the use of poetic techniques and any other artistic and literary devices at his disposal, the writer seeks to make an impact on the reader. And this is all the more important because, if he fails, his effort is wasted and his message is lost. Indeed our interest in narrative and our study of poetics assumes that the material has been put together in a particular way to achieve particular objectives and that, by close reading of the text, we can, to some extent, discern those objectives.<sup>21</sup> The answer is qualified, because we can never be quite sure we are reading the text exactly as the author intended. Something is inevitably lost in the transmission; and we must be cautious about claiming to have discovered, once and for all, what the writer meant. But that element of uncertainty should not prevent us searching for it and engaging in such historical and linguistic research as will assist in that search.

The second question is also crucial. Does knowledge of the author's intention help us uncover the meaning of the text? Answering forcefully in the affirmative, Hirsch maintains that 'to banish the original author as the determiner of meaning was to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation'.<sup>22</sup> Those who insist that meaning is contextual and arises only at the point of interaction between text and reader deny that there is a single interpretation defined in terms of the author's intention. However, without some correlation between what the writer meant and what the reader understands, the text does not function as communication. Halpern argues that if the reader does not take into account what the text means to say, the message will be missed.<sup>23</sup> Winther-Nielsen points out that modern pragmatics, which looks at the way language functions in everyday situations, emphasises the importance of intentionality in communication, and centres on the author and context rather than the reader.<sup>24</sup> Vanhoozer, taking a philosophical route,<sup>25</sup> comes to a similar conclusion: a text is 'a communicative act of a communicative

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<sup>21</sup> Sternberg (*op cit*, 10) and Vanhoozer (*op cit*, 82) challenge the inconsistency of those who argue that the author is irrelevant. At the simplest level the language in which the text is written is a function of authorial intent, as are particular nuances (often conditioned by time and culture) placed on words and expressions.

<sup>22</sup> E.D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> B. Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) p. xvii.

<sup>24</sup> N. Winther-Nielsen, 'Fact, Fiction, and Language Use: Can Modern Pragmatics Improve on Halpern's case for History in Judges' in V. Philips Long, D.W. Baker, Gordon J. Wenham, (eds), *Windows into Old Testament History* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 55-58.

<sup>25</sup> Via Wittgenstein, Austin, Searle, Ricoeur and Habermas (*op cit*, pp. 201-280).

agent fixed by writing' and 'the proper ground for textual meaning is found in the communicative activity ... of the author'.<sup>26</sup>

In my view we can, with good reason, talk about the 'meaning' of a text, and we can link that meaning with what can be discerned of the writer's intention.<sup>27</sup> The idea that a text necessarily admits several, equally legitimate, interpretations may underlie the methodology of some literary critics but it is not essential to the study of OT narrative as literature. Though we may need the humility to admit that of several possible interpretations the one we prefer may have no greater claim to be right than another!

### **OT narrative is 'historicised fiction',<sup>28</sup>**

The OT is committed to the belief that the God of Israel is the God of history, whose purposes for his people and his world are being worked out in and through history. This commitment is reflected in the way OT narrative is presented as historical. Even narratives that many view as 'legend' are written as historical accounts.<sup>29</sup> There is a tendency towards de-mythologising. This is particularly evident in the description of Israel's festivals. Though primitive pastoral and agricultural rites may lie behind the festivals of Passover and Unleavened Bread, these are linked from the beginning with a specific historical event, the Exodus. Some OT passages allude to pagan mythology, but the tendency is towards historicising the events described: thus the waters of chaos defeated by God at creation are linked with the waters of the Red Sea, and the chaos monsters, *Leviathan*, *Rahab* and *Tannin*, are linked with Israel's historical enemies.<sup>30</sup> There is also a search for meaning within history. History is regarded as an important medium of divine revelation; and the Bible writers define what it means to be a part of the people of God through the nation's collective memories.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 225.

<sup>27</sup> Because we are dealing here with inspired text, there is interplay between the intentions of its divine and human authors. These may not always be identical; though in general we recognise that there is a close relationship between the two. See Vanhoozer, *ibid*, pp. 263-265.

<sup>28</sup> Alter (*Art*, 24-25) has borrowed this expression from Herbert Schneidau, who contrasts the historical aspect particularly in Genesis and in the story of David with the mythological forms and style evident in other ancient writings; he concludes: 'what we are witnessing ... is the birth of a new kind of historicized fiction, moving steadily away from the motives and habits of the world of legend and myth' [*Sacred Discontent* (Baton Rouge: State University Press, 1976) p. 215].

<sup>29</sup> Schneidau, *op cit*, p. 214; see also, E. Auerbach, *Mimesis* (New York: Anchor, 1957) pp. 16-17.

<sup>30</sup> E.g. Psa. 74:12-17; 77:16-19; 87:4; Isa. 27:1; 30:7; 51:9-11; Jer. 51:34; Ezek. 29:3-5; 32:2-8.

<sup>31</sup> E.g. Deut. 29:9-18; Josh. 24:1-13. These collective memories are often viewed as a construct of Israel's faith, rather than as objective historical fact (see below); their 'history-like' character, though, remains of major importance.



Many regard the historical nature of OT narrative as unique in the ancient world – going beyond the legends and mythology of Israel's neighbours and even the writing of Homer. Sternberg comments on this distinctiveness:

As regards cultural value, temporal scope, and persuasive strategy, this art of narrative has no parallel in ancient times. Alone among Orientals and Greeks, it addresses a people defined in terms of their past and commanded to keep its memory alive ... the Bible is even the first to anticipate the appeal to the surviving record of the past that characterizes modern history-telling.<sup>32</sup>

Schneidau uses the term 'historicised fiction' to emphasise the distinctive historical character of OT narrative. When Alter uses the term it is to draw attention, too, to the fictional character of the stories; he maintains that even those that may have some basis in history

are not, strictly speaking, historiography, but rather the imaginative re-enactment of history by a gifted writer who organises his materials along certain thematic biases and according to his own remarkable intuition of the psychology of the characters.<sup>33</sup>

Sternberg objects to the use of the term 'fiction'. He argues that what distinguishes historiography from fiction is the truth claim of the writer. Biblical narrative claims to be historically true; and if it is not always accurate, that only makes it bad historiography, not fiction!<sup>34</sup> Alter does not draw the same distinction between fiction and the writers' intention to describe actual historical events.<sup>35</sup> In his view, describing OT narrative as fiction gives scope for the writers to use their artistry as storytellers and to present their characters as real people by introducing facets of personality, thoughts, conversations and personal details that the storyteller could not know, and are the result of imaginative reconstruction.

For many scholars, reading OT narrative as literature involves adopting an ahistorical approach. OT narrative does not record historical events; its world and its characters are real only within the context of the story. There is not a world behind the text that the writers want to tell us

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<sup>32</sup> *Op cit*, 31. See also, e.g., J. Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven; London: Yale University, 1983); after surveying historiography in the ancient world he concludes that the Deuteronomist historian is 'the first historian in Western civilisation truly to deserve this designation.' (p. 362).

<sup>33</sup> *Art*, 35

<sup>34</sup> *Op cit*, pp. 23-35. Halpern maintains that authors of historical works in the Bible, 'had authentic antiquarian intentions. They meant to furnish fair and accurate representations of Israelite activity' (*op cit*, 3).

<sup>35</sup> Alter, *World*, p. 39.

about;<sup>36</sup> rather, the text creates its own world that the reader is invited to enter – and by so doing have his own world changed.<sup>37</sup>

This has implications for our understanding of God. God is a character within the narrative; what we know of him is limited to that context and so cannot be regarded as absolute truth.<sup>38</sup> According to Sternberg, this turns God ‘from the lord of history into a creature of the imagination, with the most disastrous results’.<sup>39</sup> There is not time to discuss this further here, though it does seem axiomatic, and at the heart of the idea of the OT as revelation, that God exists as an independent reality behind the text and that the text attempts to express that reality as best it can.

We cannot fully discuss the relationship between narrative and history here, though two points may be made. We believe that God reveals himself through historical event. But if the history that is the basis for Israel’s understanding of God is not actual history, but history that has been substantially reconstructed, can OT narrative reveal anything new about God? Surely there needs to be an actual event, however distant, in order for a particular truth about God to become known and accepted. And why might such events not form the basis of tradition that is then passed on from generation to generation, and used by the Bible writers when they construct their narrative? Secondly, answering the claim that it is only through the medium of prose fiction that characters may be portrayed as ‘real’, may we not, instead, attribute the narrator’s apparent omniscience to divine inspiration? Sternberg notes that this was the view of the Rabbis;<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Many recent scholars take it for granted that the history of Israel recorded in the OT is a literary construct, with little or no value for historical reconstruction; see, e.g., P.R. Davies, *In Search of Ancient Israel* (JSOTS 148; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); idem, ‘Whose History? Whose Israel? Whose Bible? Biblical Histories, Ancient and Modern’ in L.E. Grabbe, (ed) *Can a ‘History of Israel’ be Written* (JSOTS 245, European Seminar in Historical Methodology 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) pp. 104-122; N.P. Lemche, ‘Is it Still Possible to Write a History of Ancient Israel?’ in Long (ed) *Israel’s Past in Present Research*, pp. 391-414; T.L. Thompson, *The Bible in History: How Writers Create a Past* (London: Pimlico, 2000); K.W. Whitlam, ‘Recreating the History of Israel’, *JSOT* 35 (1986) pp. 45-70. However, see also I. Provan, ‘In the Stable with the Dwarves: Testimony, Interpretation, Faith, and the History of Israel’ in Long, Baker, Wenham (eds), *Windows into OT History*, pp. 161-197; J.B. Kofoed, ‘Epistemology, Historiographical Method and the “Copenhagen School”’, *ibid*, pp. 23-43. For an overview of recent research see V.P. Long, ‘Historiography of the Old Testament’ in Baker, Arnold (eds), *The Face of OT Studies*, pp. 145-175.

<sup>37</sup> Thiselton follows Gadamer in talking about two horizons: of the world of the reader and of the world of the text. As the reader commits himself to the world of the text there is a ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer: *Horizonverschmelzung*) and in that interaction between reader and text, meaning is produced. See A. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980); idem, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: Harper Collins, 1992) p. 8; H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edn (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989) pp. 302-307; Ricoeur, *op cit*, pp. 91-92; see also D.J.A. Clines, *I, He, We, They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53* (JSOTS 1; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1976) pp. 53-56.

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Brueggemann, *op cit*, pp. 66-71; Clines, *Interested Parties*, p. 190.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 32

<sup>40</sup> Sternberg, *op cit*, pp. 58-59, 76

and even those who may not agree with the idea must assume it, in order to make sense of the narrative.<sup>41</sup>

It seems to me both possible and desirable to allow a measure of artistic license in OT narrative. The text should be viewed artistically as well as didactically; its writers employ the art of the storyteller to instruct but also to amuse and captivate readers. This does not require, though, that we accept the ahistorical view of many literary critics. The writers are still under constraints; there is a world behind the text that they are seeking to reflect. In my view they have some freedom to rearrange and maybe alter some of the text and to introduce literary and poetic techniques. But though the needs of narrative style may allow for minor changes, there is no need for large-scale reconstruction. The substance or framework of the story may be based on traditional material; and while this is unlikely to include the intimate personal details also included in the narrative, a belief in the inspiration of scripture means that we do not have to assume either, that these are the product of the writer's imagination.

## Conclusion

Setting the text free from external referents, such as authorial intention and historical context, may have limited value. Often those things are uncertain, and to make the meaning of a text dependent on speculation as to what they might be is unwise. However, to ignore historical considerations altogether as a matter of methodological dogma is equally unwise. To divorce the author's intention or the immediate historical context (where they may be uncovered) from the meaning of the text is to leave out a crucial piece of the interpretative jigsaw. This is not essential to a literary approach to OT narrative; indeed, the study of poetics assumes purpose in the way the text has been put together. Reader-centred approaches are helpful in making us aware of the ideological presuppositions of reader and text and open up other ways of looking at a text. However, it does not follow that all interpretations are equally valid. The view that OT narrative is imaginative reconstruction, with only a very oblique relation to a historical world behind the text, is also not integral to the approach. We need to assume some poetic and literary freedom – but that can take place within a broadly historical framework, whilst the narrator's omniscience can be attributed to divine inspiration.

The basic premise of this approach, and one that I endorse, is that OT narrative needs to be read and understood as story. The canonical text may have passed through a number of editorial hands, over a long period of

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 81.

time. In its final form, though, it may be viewed as a literary unity, compiled with the storyteller's art, using poetic and literary techniques. Recognising those techniques and the way they are used allows us to see more of what the writer(s) intended. However this does not justify the dichotomy between story and history, and future discussion in this area needs to look at ways of narrowing what appears to be a widening ideological and methodological gap.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The polarisation of approaches is evident in the tone of the discussion; see, *e.g.*, Provan, 'Ideologies, Literary and Critical', and the responses by Thompson and Davies – Thompson, T.L., 'A Neo-Albrightian School in History and Biblical Scholarship', *JBL* 114 (1995) pp. 683-705; Davies, P.R., 'Method and Madness: Some remarks on Doing History with the Bible', *ibid*, pp. 683-705.

## REFLECTIONS ON THE SHAPE OF THE CHURCH IN POSTMODERN WESTERN CULTURES<sup>1</sup>

When we think about possible shapes for the future of the Church in the West, it is not enough to just consider different ways of doing worship, or the design of our buildings. If the Christian gospel is to be understood by those currently outside our churches we need to think seriously about much more fundamental issues. Anything less is equivalent to moving the deckchairs around on the Titanic in the hope that we might stop it from sinking. I believe four major issues need to be confronted by our churches, and particularly by leadership of our churches, if the Church is to be effective in the emerging postmodern culture.

### 1. Ecclesiology

When it comes to evaluating our church structures, we usually do not go back far enough or ask basic enough questions, such as: What is the purpose of the church? Why does the Church exist? Rather, we tend to decide how we will do church by looking at what is going on in the culture and then working that back into our church structures. If the culture likes house music and it likes movies, then we play house music and show movie clips in our services to attract people from the culture. Worse still, we look at what is working in another church (sometimes in another country) and work that back into our existing structures. This is similar to what happens in the film 'Weekend at Bernie's' where two friends spend most of the day trying to make the corpse of their boss look like he is alive. The friends prop up the corpse, rig strings to wave its hand, and take it out for a drive, all to convince those around them that it is alive. But they fail to realise what the Church also often fails to realise: if it is dead, it should be buried to make room for what is alive.

Cultural analysis is vital, but it should not dictate what we do in the church. We must not read the culture back into, or as an overlay onto, the way we do church. Not only does that lack integrity, but it will not achieve what we want in the long term. We need to work from the culture forward into new structures for the church. Willie Williams, show designer for the Irish rock band U2's latest tour, 'Elevation', in a recent interview struggled to describe the process that had led to a very successful concert, although much simpler than the previous Pop and Zoo TV shows. He described it as

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered at the IBTS Directors' Conference on 'The Practise of Ministry in the Post. . . World', 24-30 June 2003, in Prague, Czech Republic.

going ‘forward to basics’. I think that is a very good way to look at what we need to do in the Church. Go forward to basics. Decide what is important and not negotiable, let go of everything else, and build from there according to what we want to achieve. This involves interpreting our culture in the light of our theology and our understanding of scripture and church history. We cannot move into the future church by just critiquing what we are doing now.

Knowing what we want in the long term is a very good place to begin. How will my three year-old grandson, Taite, as he grows up, hear the gospel in a language he can understand without having to undergo cultural circumcision? What shape does the Church have to be in order to provide him with a place to belong, a place that will nurture his spiritual desires and bring him to faith in Christ? I understand the ‘new wine and wineskins’ story to mean that new structures are needed, not just a few new ideas to tart up the old wineskin of our worship and church life.

Instead of shifting the deckchairs and propping up the corpse, perhaps we need to go forward to basics and ask: What is the purpose of the Church? What does the Church, my church, exist to do? When we know that, then we can make better decisions about how it might do that.

At Cityside Baptist Church, where I have the privilege of belonging, ‘we exist to build a community that will sustain people in their following of Christ in the world’. Community...sustain...following Christ...in the world... Each word and phrase is important. We measure all we do against that statement: church polity, leadership, worship, role of the pastor, church meetings, ministry, pastoral care, music, mission, etc. When we know what our church exists for, then we can look at scripture, church history, past traditions, the culture – even other churches – and make good decisions about our own church life.

## **2. Clergy/Laity**

I believe that the greatest problem facing the Church in the West is not syncretism or secularism or pluralism, but clergyism. Leaders who do not know themselves what the Church is for and their role in it are the greatest impediment to the growth of the church in the next 30 years. The only antidote is for us to understand what clergy and laity mean in the New Testament and to put that into practice in the present day.

In reality, the New Testament contains no theology of laity or clergy as separate groups. Rather, *laos*, the Greek root underlying the term ‘laity’, means ‘people’ and thus refers to the ministry of the whole people of God –

all of us, together. *Kleros*, which stands behind the word ‘clergy’, means the appointed or endowed ones; it does not refer to special leaders, but, likewise, to the whole people of God, the *laos*. Thus, the church does not have a laity and a clergy, in the sense in which we use those words, but the church is all laity and clergy. It is made up of people who are endowed, commissioned and appointed by God to continue God's service and mission in the world.

Author Paul Stevens<sup>2</sup> adds two more ‘isms’ to the usual list of dangers facing the Church: clericalism and anticlericalism. Clericalism is the domination of ‘ordinary’ people by those ordained, trained and invested with power. Stevens recommends posing the following questions to help leaders recognise clericalism: Do you expect to be treated differently than those in your congregation because of your position? Do you get annoyed with the unreliable, incompetent, unavailable laity? Anticlericalism, equally as bad, is domination by the ‘laity’ who reject or refuse to work with ordained church leadership. Power, authority, dominance may be just as prevalent among non-leaders as leaders.

Usually when we think of the Church, we almost inevitably think of a hierarchy of ministry. Cross-cultural missionaries are at the top, closest to God and undertaking real ministry. Clergy, pastors, ministers, youth pastors, theological educators come next, with the helping professions – teachers, doctors, nurses, childcare workers, and homemakers – behind them. Those in the trades and business follow, and below them politicians and other marginally valuable occupations – like stockbrokers, accountants and lawyers. Then finally.... ‘the rest’. Real ministry takes place at the top; that is where the ‘real Christians’ operate. The role of the others is to support and resource them. But the New Testament makes it quite clear that this is a lie.

Recently, I struggled to know how to commission and send out a woman from our congregation who was going to the Middle East to teach missionaries’ children. She, the mission society and some members of our congregation expected the usual fuss and ceremony. But how could I place her ministry and vocation above that of the school teachers who taught in our hometown? Were they less called, less important to the work of the Kingdom? No. So we did three things:

1. We talked to the congregation about why we were praying particularly and offering financial support for this woman – because she would be unpaid, would be a woman in a non-Western society, and was going to a dangerous part of the world;

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<sup>2</sup> Paul R. Stevens, *The Other Six Days*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

2. We ensured that the language we used did not elevate her calling above others;
3. We instituted an annual and ongoing 'commissioning' of all the work of the congregation.

Similarly, when theological students come to work with us at Cityside we do not acknowledge or recognise them in any special way; we do not even introduce them from the pulpit or by newsletter. But they are welcome to do anything and everything that anyone else in the congregation can do – which is anything and everything! They are not given power or status above that of anyone else.

I am not attempting to reduce the significance of what a missionary or a pastoral leader does but rather to raise the significance of what Mary does at her school, or John does at the car repair shop, or as a parent in the home or an unemployed person living in a boarding house. Cityside is the home church for 130 missionaries sent out to minister, mostly in New Zealand culture.

This does not mean, however, that there is no leadership. There is servant leadership, and no hierarchy of ministries. Any Citysider can start a ministry or home group or mission activity at any time without needing the permission of any body or person. There is no censorship. There are no hurdles; only a high degree of trust and a desire to see people maturing as followers of Christ as they work out their salvation in the world.

Baptist churches are in a unique position to present a new model of church, for we have no legal impediments to breaking down the structures and operating in a New Testament way. I have found it very hard at times to operate at this level of commitment to other people's ministry and opinion. At times it has been threatening, confronting, humbling, terrifying; I have had to apologise often for taking power that was not mine. But I am absolutely committed to making it work.

### **3. Worship Leader versus Curator<sup>3</sup>**

Several years ago I attended an art exhibition that totally changed my approach to worship. The entrance to the art gallery had become a dressing room where I was fitted with a clear plastic body suit (stapled to fit my contours), plastic bags tied over my shoes, surgeon's rubber gloves put on my hands, and the outfit topped off with a white hardhat with full clear

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the content of this section first appeared in *The Prodigal Project*: by Mike Riddell, Mark Pierson and Cathy Kirkpatrick. (Oxford: SPCK, 2001).



visor. I shuffled through a door of hanging plastic strips into a huge white space with floor, walls and ceiling all white and large floor-to-ceiling flexible mirrors along the walls. About ten big circular children's paddling pools were spread around the space. Each of the pools had a fountain spurting paint – each filled with a different coloured paint. Paint sprayed down at random intervals from showerheads hidden in the ceiling, splattering the space and the audience with paint! It was confusing – not what I expected in an art gallery – and wonderful – I was part of the installation; a participant not just a spectator. All I could think about as I slipped around the paint-splashed floor between the fountains and pools, and stood under paint drips and sprays in my child's-play version of a space suit was: 'Wouldn't it be great if we could do worship in a setting like this'; worship that encouraged active participation and open-ended interpretation; room to move physically and cognitively within a very creative context and content.

The more I thought about my paint-pond experience, the more I began thinking about the possibilities of art as worship and, more significantly, of worship as art; in particular, of worship preparation as an art. What would happen to the worship I prepared if I looked at the task differently? What if I saw the worship not as a mechanical, logical, modernist task of putting stuff in the right order so it progressed through a form to give a predetermined message with an anticipated outcome, but instead saw myself more like the curator of an art gallery – a curator who considers the space and environment as well as the content of worship and who takes these elements and puts them in a particular arrangement, considering juxtaposition, style, distance, light, shade and so on; a *maker of a context* for worship rather than a *presenter of content*; a provider of a frame inside which the elements are arranged and rearranged to convey a particular message for a particular purpose, a message that may or may not be overtly obvious, similar to the message perceived by another worshipper, or the one taken away by anyone, but trusts that the Holy Spirit will make it uniquely real, alive and appropriate.

This raises questions about whether all interpretations have equal validity and if it is possible for an interpretation to be wrong, i.e., for worshippers to 'misread' the worship and for historic Christian faith to be misrepresented. The main safeguard must be that our worship be based around the stories of the Bible. These stories of God's involvement with people through history, and in particular of Jesus' dealings with people, are the core of Christian faith. If we use them as the core of our worship we should not wander too far from the centre, providing we are resisting the temptation to always 'explain' what the stories mean rather than letting

them speak for themselves. I have great confidence in the Holy Spirit to 'explain' all that is necessary and to make applications that I am totally unaware of.

My working definition of worship is very simple: worship is a person or persons responding to God. While not covering all the bases, it provides a clear focus that I can keep in mind. So instead of being a Worship-Leader, or Worship-Planner, I have become a Worship-Curator. My role as Worship Curator is to provide settings in which people can respond to God, in other words, where people can listen to God, meet God, hear God, sense God, and respond – heart, soul, mind, and strength – to God. I seek to provide contexts, experiences of worship for others to participate in, to provide room for the Holy Spirit to move. At Cityside, we have a team of worship curators, which is not just a different name for the person who leads songs. The curator is responsible for the shape of the whole service, from the time when the doors are opened to when they are locked up afterwards. We operate a rostered liturgical order of service where different people curate each element within the service, and the main curator brings them together like works of art in a gallery.

The purpose of the curator is to enable people to respond to God with all their being; and the huge range in people types, personal experiences, time on the journey of faith, learning styles, faith stages and so on needs not only to be allowed, but catered for in worship. The Spirit works in mysterious ways, according to her own agenda; she is not to be compartmentalised or proscribed. These understandings have revolutionised my approach to 'organising church services'.

I believe that in a world where individualism, privatism, pluralism, relativism, and institutionalism reign supreme, only radically different approaches to our church life and worship life will enable us to create communities of faith that can interpret the gospel in appropriate ways that can be understood by the culture. I believe worship curation to be one of those concepts.

#### **4. Excellence**

I want to close by making a very brief comment about excellence in worship.<sup>4</sup> I am anti-excellence. Perhaps I should say, instead, that I am pro-participation and would place participation before excellence every time. I like to think of our life as a community of faith in terms of a jazz band rather than the more familiar body image of the New Testament. While all

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<sup>4</sup>For a fuller development of this, see my article at [www.cityside.org.nz](http://www.cityside.org.nz).

the members of a jazz band are gifted and competent in their own right, all are committed to the overall sound of the band and to making a piece of music succeed. Individual members are highlighted from time to time, and other members step back and support the individual before stepping forward themselves at another time.

If we are serious about growing mature followers of Christ and sustaining them in their following of Christ in the world, then that will only happen as people are allowed to participate in leading worship and in leadership of the church at whatever level they are capable of. Why does church leadership need to vet and approve every home group leader and every programme of the church? Why are we willing to give people great and heavy responsibilities in the church, but very little authority to carry out those tasks? What are we afraid of? Whose reputation are we trying to protect? What is the purpose of the church anyway?

Which brings us back to where we started!

**The Revd Mark Pierson** has been a minister in Baptist churches for 20 years and currently serves as pastor at Cityside Baptist Church in Auckland, New Zealand. He has co-authored, with Mike Riddell and Cathy Kirkpatrick of *The Prodigal Project*, a book and interactive CD-ROM entitled 'For those who love God but struggle to belong to the church', (SPCK, 2001), published in April, 2003.

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Sergei Viktorovich Sannikov**

*Twenty Centuries of Christianity. First Millenium.* Volume One.

*Textbook in two volumes*

(In Russian, *Dvadtsat' Vekov Hristianstva. Pervoe Tisecheletie*, T.1. Uchebnoe posobie v dvuh tomah)

Odessa, 'Bogomislie' Publisher, 2002, 668 pp., hardcover, \$20.00

The first volume of Sergei Sannikov's two-volume compendium is now available. (The second volume was published in 2001.) Written by a renowned Ukrainian Baptist scholar and lecturer, currently serving as executive director of the Euro-Asian Accreditation Association, it presents a superb overview of the most significant events in the Christian story from the beginning of first century CE to the parting of eastern and western Christianity in 1054. Whilst the compendium is intended as a textbook for Church History courses of the newly-founded Russian language theological schools, these two volumes are the most comprehensive survey of the development of the Christian religion available within the growing body of evangelical Christian literature originally written in Eastern Europe. It continues the efforts of the EAAA as part of the 'Biblical Pulpit' project to respond to the need for contextual research, teaching and studying of Christian tradition in the former Communist-block countries.

Although the book is written from the perspective of a committed Christian, whose convictions are well evident, it avoids apologetic or confessional biases; it is ecumenical in spirit and scholarly in methodology and objectivity. Sannikov introduces the historic exposition with a very helpful Prolegomena which outlines philosophical and methodological presuppositions of historiography. The dust cover represents visually and symbolically the author's view on the history of the church as both culturally dependent and culture forming: a pagan ruler, a Christian martyr and a Christian emperor represent the spirit of the age in a nutshell.

As with the previous volume, this work presents an integrated view of the development of Christianity in both East and West. Christianity is presented as a global phenomenon, closely associated with the evolution of surrounding cultures. This holistic picture, however, does not hide or obscure the rich diversity of movements and personalities in Christian history. Sannikov has a gift of using personal stories as a methodological tool for emphasising historically significant events. The flow of the Christian story is interspersed with a series of vignettes: historical accounts

of particularities from the history of theology, personal biographies of the heroes and foes of Christian faith and the church's missionary undertakings, as well as insights into different Christian traditions and cultures. This balance of a global vision and a fine taste for detail makes the reading of this work a rewarding experience.

An interesting feature is the author's synoptic historical perspective. He sees Christianity simultaneously as an ecclesial phenomenon, with its own integrity, and as a driving force to impact and change all levels of societal life. The history of the Christian religion is a history of a genuine culture, with its intellectual, political and artistic expressions influenced by and penetrating into the fibres of a complex social fabric. It is especially true in the Eastern European context.

The text is richly illustrated with graphics, which contribute significantly to the didactic purpose and the holistic message of the book. This unique collection of highest-quality reproductions from rare manuscripts, pictures, frescos, carvings, sculptures, architectural monuments and coins, tells the Christian story through artifacts complementary to the text.

The appendices themselves express the scope and depth of Sannikov's scholarship; they are a fine collection of primary sources, some of them from Slavonic originals. The arrangement of the readings follows the three major divisions of the book: early patristics, late patristics and medieval Christendom. The collection is followed by a series of helpful charts of all the Christian Councils of the undivided church until 1054; the Constantinopolitan Patriarchs, Roman Popes and Metropolitans and Patriarchs of Kiev and Moscow (important information for the study of the relationship of the Russian Orthodox Church with the See of the Ecumenical Patriarch and the See in Rome), rulers of the Roman Empire, Byzantine, Western European Royal Dynasties, Russia and Ukraine, as well as dynasties of Muslim rulers of the territories which directly influenced the development of Christianity in the first millenium. The bibliographical guide for the two volumes is located at the end of volume two.

I highly recommend Dr Sannikov's book to students, teachers, scholars and all interested in learning more about the Christian story in the first ten centuries as told from an Eastern European Christian perspective.

**The Revd Dr Parush Parushev**  
Academic Dean and Director of Applied Theology, IBTS

**Peter Shepherd**

***The Making of a Modern Denomination: John Howard Shakespeare and the English Baptists 1898-1924***

Studies in Baptist History and Thought, Volume 4

Paternoster Press, Carlisle, UK. 2002. 220 pages. UK £19.99

This is a fascinating book for European Baptists. John Howard Shakespeare was a major figure in the Baptist world, and he created many of the offices and structures of the Baptist Union of Great Britain in the early part of the last century. A considerable number of the initiatives he took were used elsewhere in Baptist communities; thus his innovations have influenced many aspects of the way that Baptists now organise themselves in Unions and in the BWA and EBF.

Shakespeare was the driving force behind the creation of a national secretariat designed to serve the associations and churches. He developed and refined concepts for gathering funds to be redistributed as grant aid to churches and ministers; he was at the heart of the development of a ministerial recognition and settlement system; and he introduced the idea of ministers appointed to have oversight in specific geographical locations, a pattern which has been replicated in other large Unions and Conventions.

These factors alone make him someone whose life and ideas should be studied by all involved in the ministry of Unions and Conventions in Europe. In this book, Peter Shepherd convincingly argues that Shakespeare was an applied theologian – he was looking for structures that would help make the denomination an effective organisation for the support of ministers and churches in their tasks. Though academically gifted, he was not a person who developed the work of British Baptists from a theoretical theology, but more by observing how others addressed similar problems and then looking for appropriate practical solutions in his own context. According to Shepherd, Shakespeare appeared to believe that if we could only get the structures of the denomination right then this could reverse membership decline. Today, the accent is much more on the conviction that if we can get our mission theology right we can engage with our post-modern world.

So, for instance, he came up with the centrally appointed office of Superintendent, modeled, apparently, on the Lutheran concept. This model has been criticised in recent decades by, amongst others, the Anglicans; and it is interesting to note that many Unions in Europe have moved away from the ‘superintendency’ language, with its accent on policing and control, to the more ‘pastoral’ New Testament language of bishop. The British Union

itself has moved recently to regionally appointed and accountable ministers, abandoning the concept of Shakespeare in a reconsideration of authentic Baptist identity.

Shakespeare was, of course, intimately involved with the founding of the Baptist World Alliance. He threw his organising skills into the inaugural Congress in 1905. He thoroughly enjoyed this wider scene and was appointed co-convenor for the next Congress and Joint Secretary of the BWA with J N Prestridge of the United States Baptist Journal, *Argus*. The development of the BWA brought European Baptists closer together; and at the next Congress in 1911, Shakespeare was given the title European Secretary. One key event was his visit to Hungary in 1907 to assist Hungarian Baptists in issues of organisation and State recognition. He sought to avoid the worst excesses of interdependency and helped the Hungarians devise a constitution which was much more interdependent. It was this model that influenced other European Unions. Shakespeare continued in his role as Eastern Hemisphere Secretary of the BWA through to the Stockholm Congress in 1923; but as the years progressed, much of the work done by British Baptists with European colleagues was handled by J H Rushbrooke.

Shepherd also carefully examines the role of Shakespeare as an ecumenist. His first desire was to see the free or dissenting churches of England working more closely together, to which he gave much energy. Later, he became captivated by the thought of wider unity involving Anglicans. This led him into difficulties with many British Baptists and to criticism by the scholar T R Glover. It also caused Southern Baptists in the USA to be wary of him, and only hard work by his friends persuaded Southern Baptists to vote for his re-appointment as BWA Eastern Hemisphere Secretary in 1923.

In later years, Shakespeare suffered periods of disability apparently brought on by overwork. He lived with, and suffered from, the criticism of others who disliked his ecumenical tendencies and his desire to develop a structured denomination. Shepherd gives us both the glories and the struggles of this prodigious worker.

The book ought to be compulsory reading for Union, EBF and BWA senior staff because it identifies vital issues about Baptist denominational life and how leadership can be offered, but not always accepted. Those of us who teach and lecture about Baptist ecclesiology will use this book to show how, if we do not take our theology and ecclesiology seriously, we might well flounder and struggle in our organisational life.

This is another excellent volume in the series *Studies in Baptist History and Thought*, and we look forward to further offerings.

**The Revd Keith G Jones**  
Rector, IBTS

**Keith Clements**

***The Churches in Europe as Witnesses to Healing***

World Council of Churches, Geneva. 2003. 128 pp. €16.00

Keith Clements is well known to us as General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches. As a British Baptist scholar, he has been much involved in Baptist life and work throughout the world over several decades; and we have valued the steady flow of books he has produced.

This new volume is a collection of papers and sermons addressing the challenges facing churches in Europe in our calling to communicate the gospel of healing and reconciliation. It is designed as a resource for the 12<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Conference of European Churches being held in Trondheim, Norway, in June 2003.

In the first chapter he poses the question: Are we churches still of any use? He paints a sober and realistic picture of the churches in Europe, then typically affirms our importance if only we will be honest about who we are and apply ourselves to the hard work of theological reflection upon our life and mission, preferably ecumenically. We expect no less from Keith who has guided the European Christian family into the *Charta Ecumenica*.

This accent on how faith is to be shared and witnessed, in a Europe where people are suspicious of institutions and tired of rhetoric, makes it a timely publication and one which ought to be a set text for those studying mission in Europe today. His emphasis on European Christians as being 'on the margins' confirms many of us looking for new ways of being church as we recover insights from earlier marginalised groups, such as the Anabaptists, who were able to engage in effect mission from the margins.

**The Revd Keith G Jones**  
Rector, IBTS